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Yesterday morning, I stumbled across an article from a major news outlet entitled: Holiday Stress is Here: How to have a calmer, more peaceful next few months. The article was written by a former psychiatric nurse who encouraged readers to set boundaries and manage expectations. Her advice was not to start forty new Christmas traditions this year, and surprisingly, not to talk politics over the Christmas dinner table. She made the usual exhortation to mindfulness techniques, and then shockingly made an appeal for prayer, to leave all the details to God and find encouragement from reading Scripture! Can you believe it? A major news outlet, encouraging us to pray and read our Bibles this Christmas season!

Thankfully, we do not need the news to tell us it is time to get back to the essentials. This is why the Church keeps the season of Advent, a season of preparation. Advent is one of the most interesting of Church seasons, because in no other season is the difference between the Church and the world most obvious. The world's preparation for Christmas, and the Church's preparation for Christmas are at complete odds. Ideally, we began our Christmas preparations last week, with Stir up Sunday, and then Thanksgiving Day, in which we were hopefully reminded that we should be grateful for our family and friends and for all of God's provision through the year past. Yet, it seems our culture still hangs on to some vestige of Thanksgiving, but then forgets it all with its black Friday sales and the mad rush to get to the stores. Thankfully, I have not heard of anyone being nearly trampled to death this year. Yet, curiously enough, even Christians celebrate Christmas in a way that completely disregards its true meaning and message.

So, for Christians, Advent is the season that prepares us for the true meaning of Christmas, for our Christmas Communion, for the coming of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem and at the end of the world when He shall judge both the quick and the dead. Our Gospel lesson for today is not yet preparing us for a jolly and warm "Merry Christmas". The prophecy for Palm Sunday, behold, thy king cometh unto thee, is proclaimed in today's Gospel. So we read, at this beginning of Advent, what exactly we are preparing for and ask ourselves where we stand in relation to it. Are we preparing to welcome some kind of king like the Jews of old? Are we preparing for the coming of Jesus in any way? When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was buzzing with preparations for the coming Passover, something like Christmas for most people, but their preparations for Passover did not prepare them to receive and accept their Messiah or Savior. Rather like contemporary Christians

they were preparing for a traditional feast that had been celebrated for centuries but bears no traces of any spiritual meaning.

But today, unbeknownst to them, Jesus' Disciples were preparing for the coming of a very different kind of king and feast. They helped to pave Jesus' entry into the city, even though they probably did not know how or why the multitude came to wave palm branches and straw their cloaks for Jesus, spreading out for Him an impromptu red carpet. Yet the truth is that at that time the multitude of common, poor people, were the best prepared to welcome their King. They welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with what they had; the very clothes on their backs, and with what was at hand, palm, and olive branches, while singing a simple song of Hosanna, which means save now. This teaches us a great truth, that the simplest in heart, are often more prepared to meet and celebrate Jesus, than those considered wise and prudent. At least the crowds who welcomed Jesus' first entry into Jerusalem seemed prepared to greet him with faith, hope, and love. They welcomed a king for sure and were intent upon singing His praise for the future, though they knew so little about what kind of King he intended to become and what he would do to serve His people.

Meanwhile the wise and prudent, the scribes and Pharisees, the traditionalists, and conservatives of Jesus' time, watching it all unfold from a distance, and the heart of the city, the Temple, are the least prepared to meet Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees knew the scriptures, the Temple was their domain, and tradition was their possession. They knew the finest details of the external and visible law, and ritual. But their hearts were far from God. The Temple was the center of the religious life of all Israel, it was the focus of everyone's Passover preparations. And yet when Jesus enters it, He finds that it has been given over completely to monetary gain and materialism. The religious folk of Jesus' day were consumed with the external and visible world, with money and mammon, with materialism and earthly treasures. But Jesus does not walk away sheepishly or sit idly by. Instead, He casts out the money changers, flipping over tables and chairs, and in one account fashions a whip out of the dropped coins. Then He pronounces the sentence of judgment, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves, using the time-honored words of the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus was coming to earth as a new kind of king. He cared nothing for earthly treasure. He came to bring God's worth, meaning, and value back into the world. He came to bring man back to his spiritual senses and He would do what

was necessary to reconcile man to the love of God and the journey home to His kingdom.

A Gospel lesson that at first seems out of place in the Church year, provides an interesting commentary on the Christmas season. If the worship of the Temple could be perverted by materialism, just imagine how easy it is for our worship to become centered on the material and worldly. It is not hard for us to imagine for no other time of year is this danger most apparent. It is a fight that has been going on for so long that it is cliché to say, we must always remember the true reason for the season. But how else can we truly have a Happy Christmas? How else can we experience Christmas Joy that does not disappear on December 26th? How else can we defeat once and for all the despair that so frequently follows upon our temporary joys unless we are willing for Jesus to become that kind of king that will call us to the business of His Heavenly Father? How else can we defeat unhappiness, disappointment, superficiality, and the meaninglessness that characterizes contemporary life without His fierce assault on our sins, our vices, our idolatry, and our unfaithfulness? How else can we find true joy if not from Jesus, God's own Son, who becomes our King?

For this reason, Advent looks a little bit like Lent, even though it is a semi-penitential season. One would not be too surprised to hear fellow parishioners talk of renewed efforts to pray or fast in these weeks before Christmas, and these are noble efforts. But the truth is that any attempt to keep our focus on Jesus beyond all the rush and busy-ness of this most wonderful time of year, is going to seem like mortification. And indeed, it should be. Preparing for our Christmas Communion, of when Jesus came to earth the first time, should be a lot like preparing for Jesus to come to earth the second time, when He comes again in glory on the last day. Advent calls us to look past all the lights, the wrapping paper, and the reindeer to where Transcendent God became Immanent, not in a great and glittering temple, or an emperor's palace, but of all places a manger in the backwater town of Bethlehem. Amen.